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General and Special Staffs

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GENERAL AND SPECIAL STAFFS

by

Lieutenant Colonel Frank M. Smith

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Adjutant General's School

Lecture Series

ADJUTANT GENERAL'S SCHOOL

Fort Washington
Maryland

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of his organization. He is responsible for mobilization and conduct of training schools, and, in battle, combat orders.

G-4 has supply and evacuation. He plans for procurement, storage and distribution of all necessary supplies.

This description touches only in a broad way the duties of each general staff officer. Obviously, each member of the staff must deal closely with other staff members, as hardly a question arises which does not in some way affect the staff section. Hence cooperation between the staff sections must be very close. In a triangular division, there is no provision for G-1, these duties being performed by some other staff officer, as directed by the commander. In some organizations G-1 duties are performed by the adjutant general; in others by G-4.

The Special Staff. The special staff consists of an adjutant general, chemical warfare officer, engineer officer, headquarters commandant, ordnance officer, signal officer, surgeon, chaplain, finance officer, inspector general, judge advocate, quartermaster, special services officer, such assistants to these officers as may be designated, and other officers who from time to time may be temporarily attached to the staff for specific purposes. Some of these officers of the special staff, in addition to their staff duties, are commanders of units. For example, the signal officer commands the signal company; the engineer officer commands the engineer battalion; the surgeon, the medical battalion; the quartermaster, the quartermaster battalion.

Special staff officers are specialists in their particular arms or services. Their general functions include technical and tactical advice and recommendations to the commander and his general staff; preparation of plans, estimates and orders, in order to relieve the general staff of routine duties; coordination of their tactical and administrative plans and activities with the general staff sections.

The foregoing gives a broad picture of the general and special staff functions of a division. The detailed duties of all staff sections may be found in the Staff Officers' Field Manual, FM 101-5.

The question may be asked: "Why the staff? Why isn't the commander sufficient?" The staff, in some form, is as old as command, and may be said to go back to the period when

armed hordes were first grouped into definite military organizations. Commanders have always employed assistants or staff officers in some form or another, first as couriers to deliver oral orders, later as military secretaries with the primary duty of reducing the commander's orders to writing, and still later as assistants in the performance of administration and tactical duties.

When armies were small, a commander with a few assistants could work out the details of administrative plans and orders. Fighting formations and questions of administration, supply, and so forth, were comparatively simple. Battle fields were restricted and troops usually fought under the personal observation of the commander. As armies became larger and more complex, commanders were compelled to shift more and more of the burden of administrative detail to the shoulders of assistants in order to conserve their time and their energy for the maneuvering of their fighting units. As weapons improved and fighting formations became more dependent on specific tactical situations and less on fixed rules of geometric tactical formations, commanders found the need for a distinct type of assistant, an officer who could relieve the commander of some of the burden of tactical detail. Thus was developed the staff group that may be called the tactical staff or in large units the general staff.

The unit staff of our modern battalions and regiments is an outgrowth of this evolution. In it are combined some of the functions of both the tactical and the administrative staff.

An individual immersed in the intricacies of a day of current operation is in a bad way so far as looking into the future is concerned. He has difficulty in cutting himself loose from the details in order that he may have the calm and composure which are indispensable to the planner. The thought underlying the establishment of the general staff is that there must be some individuals who can cut themselves free from the worries of the moment, sit themselves down, and think. In the case of the War Department General Staff, they should think about how good the policy is under which we are doing things for an army of the size we have today, or how that policy will apply to a force we contemplate mobilizing in six months or eight months or a year. They should think about coordinating any contemplated changes with the judge advocate, quartermaster, or other general and special staff officers concerned. In this way only can we be sure that we will oper-

ate on sound policies. Such operation is a fundamental necessity in any efficient institution. Do not from this get the idea that the general staff is composed of a body of supermen. It consists of individuals carefully selected, supposedly intelligent, who are freed of the routine grind and are set apart to think, to confer and to formulate policies and plans. That is their province.

The Commander. If we are to understand the underlying principles governing staff organization and function, a clear conception of command responsibility and command function is absolutely necessary. The controlling head of a military organization is the commander. He alone is responsible to his proper superior for everything his command does or fails to do. He alone is responsible for all basic decisions, plans, and policies which emanate from his headquarters. *Mark this well*—this responsibility cannot be shared and it cannot be delegated. In order to meet this responsibility, the commander must be able to make his authority felt. Therefore his will must be obeyed by each member of his command. It is obvious that personal contact between a commander and the individuals who make up his command becomes more and more difficult as the size of the unit increases. Experience has proven that the number of individuals which a commander can personally supervise and control is extremely limited. This is more true today than in years past, due to the increased rapidity with which units move and act.

How then is the commander, this single controlling and single responsible head, effectively to direct each of the many individuals composing his command? How is he to make his authority felt and his will obeyed by each individual? He cannot do this by personal supervision and direct orders to each individual, as can the corporal or the sergeant. He must have some frame-work of organization or grouping by which he can impose his will on a few subordinates, each responsible directly and only to him, so that through them he may be able to make his authority felt—down to the last private. This framework is provided by organizing successive subordinate groups, each under its own commander, and each subordinate commander responsible to his immediate superior for all that his subdivision does or fails to do. This succession of subordinate commanders through whom a commander of the whole exercises his authority and control is known as the "Chain of Command."

An adjutant general or an adjutant should study carefully the chain of command and violate it only in case of dire emergency. Somewhere along the chain of command an adjutant is apt to find a commander who is jealous of his command. This type of commander certainly does not want to be passed over when anything arises which concerns his command.

This chain of command is the vital artery of the command system. All authority and all responsibility flow through this artery and through it only. Cut it anywhere throughout its course only at the peril of seriously disrupting the one operation that will insure the effective execution of the will of the commander.

As we ascend the scale of the hierarchy of military command, we eventually reach a point where the number of units grouped under a single responsible commander imposes upon him details so numerous and so exacting that he cannot possibly have the time and the physical or mental endurance to attend to all of them in person and at the same time give his attention to the broader phases of his duties. When this point is reached, the commander must be provided with assistants to relieve him of the burden of details in connection with the issuance and distribution of orders, the evaluation of information, the supply and movement of his troops, and one thousand and one details with which the commander is concerned. These assistants are known as the staff. Their introduction into the military system does not in any way alter the basic principles of command and responsibility. Firmly fix in your mind that they are no part of the chain of command. The commander retains his full responsibility and exacts as complete responsibility from his subordinate commanders as though these assistants—the staff—had not been provided.

The line of authority and responsibility passes directly from commander to subordinate commander. It does not pass through the staff nor can the staff assume the authority or responsibility of the chain of command.

From this discussion, it can be seen that command, responsibility, and organization are interdependent. Together they form the foundation and framework without which no military superstructure can stand. Not only must the foregoing be clearly understood by prospective commanders, it must also be understood by prospective staff officers. They are assistants to the commander, performing in his name such of the

details pertaining to the commander's functions as he may delegate to them. In the performance of these details they must keep in mind the responsibility of their commander and the means by which their commander holds his subordinate commanders to their responsibilities. Those of you who have served under commanders are undoubtedly aware that some commanders rely largely on their staffs while others want to handle each problem themselves. The command life of the individual who desires to handle each problem himself will probably be short. No one can accomplish the impossible. It is too large an order for a commander of a large command to delve into the multitudinous details that confront him in the administration of his command. If he is a successful commander, he will delegate authority. If you are a successful adjutant general or adjutant, you will early determine what to bring to the commander's attention and what not to bring. You will find, and justly so, an irritable commander if you habitually bother him with petty details which should be disposed of within your own office.

Relations of the Adjutant General or Adjutant to His Commander, Staff of Commander, and the Command. Anyone who reads readily learns the written principles of staff. The staff is designed to serve: first the commander—a human being; and next the troops—an aggregation of human beings. A successful adjutant general or adjutant will make a close study of these human beings. He must know them—as individuals and collectively. He must know their methods, their characteristics, their reactions. He will know how these human beings apply the principles and practices of staff operations. Knowing these things, he is going to be a help to the commander. Not knowing them, he will probably be an instrument of discord, of meddlesome interference, causing disorganization, distrust and low morale.

The cardinal principle by which an adjutant or any staff officer must be bound is, "The staff neither commands nor executes, for it has no element subordinate to its authority." The staff only assists the commander in preparing, transmitting and following up his orders, and in so doing recognizes no authority save that of the commander. Good commanders usually resent any trespass on their authority, especially by staff officers. One sees adjutants general who try to run the command. In the name of the commander they issue orders and give directions of which the commander has no knowl-

edge. That is a vital mistake, one that inevitably leads to discord and discontent—a condition which an adjutant general with the best interest of his commander at heart should always seek to avoid. No staff officer should ever trespass on the authority of the commander. One who attempts to do so will quickly find that he has forfeited the confidence of his commander and that his usefulness as a staff officer is at an end. Even the appearance of usurpation must be studiously avoided. The phrases: "I desire," "I direct," must never be used by a staff officer. He should say: "It is desired," "It is directed," or, if orally, "The general desires or directs."

Exclusive of the commander himself, there is no individual of a command in a position to wield so much influence as is the adjutant general. He has, perhaps, a broader knowledge of all the problems which confront the commander than has anyone else. This is true because his office is the office through which passes all the official correspondence. He is also the confidant to whom many will come for consultation on their personal as well as their official affairs. In order that, as an adjutant general, your knowledge of these things may be directed into the proper channel and your influence used to keep peace and harmony in the official family and keep the machine well-oiled and smoothly-running, you must—and it is essential—know your family. Knowing them, you should adjust yourself and your actions to fit the case at hand.

You will probably find, after you have served under different commanders, that no two follow the same method of command. If you would assist the commander you must know the man. His way of doing business must be studied. His peculiarities and his idiosyncrasies must be understood. This is done not with any idea of attempting a reformation of your commander, but with the idea that you are going to do his business in his way. For instance, you will find that some commanders require that a mass of detailed data be presented to them. Others want only the essential facts, short and to the point. Know what your commander wants, the way he wants it; then spare no effort to give it to him that way. Do not misconstrue this to mean that you or any other staff officer is to become a "Yes man." Quite the contrary! You must have the personal courage and integrity to present, when requested, your best ideas and thoughts irrespective of the known opinion of others. But once a decision is given you by your commander you must carry that decision into effect in detail and loyally abide by it.

A good staff will keep the commander informed on all important matters affecting the command. Put this on your *MUST* list. The embarrassment of a commander can well be imagined when he discovers from an outside source that something has been going on in his organization for some time, and his staff has failed to inform him of it. Matters of this nature are a real test of the judgment and common sense of the staff officer. Any good staff officer desires to relieve his commander of all unimportant details. He should marshal the essential facts bearing on important questions before asking his commander to make decisions. Where shall you, as adjutant, draw the line? Is the subject one that the commander must be informed of at once, even though you are unprepared to present him with the essential facts? Is the subject one which you may withhold from the commander until such time as you are able to gather the essential facts and are prepared to make a definite recommendation? Is it a matter that may be classified as an unimportant detail that need not be presented to the commander? The answer to such questions cannot be found by the application of any formula. Good judgment and common sense will usually lead to the right answer. If you desire to follow a rule, follow one that will do no harm: "Resolve every reasonable doubt in favor of informing the commander."

A question now is: "How should matters be presented to a commander for decision?" This will depend on the way in which you have found your commander wants matters presented and can be answered only after your study of the *Man*. Usually the commander wants facts. Whenever possible, the staff officer must marshal all the facts bearing on the subject. He must either arrange these facts in a logical manner in writing or be prepared to present them orally. He should analyze these facts and their bearing on the problem at hand. The arrangement and consideration of these facts should enable him to arrive at a conclusion regarding the question. This conclusion he should give to the commander in the form of a definite recommendation. If time permits, the action required to put this recommendation into effect, if it is approved by the commander, should be stated with the recommendation. This procedure saves time, for as soon as the commander indicates his approval, the case is ready for signature and dispatching. Should the commander fail to approve the recommendation or should he modify it in any way, then the staff officer must cheerfully accept the change and pro-

ceed to carry out the commander's wishes with the same enthusiasm as though the original recommendation had been approved in full.

This question of loyalty may be illustrated by a story. Several years ago there was a dangerous oil well fire in Texas. The fire assumed such proportions that every effort of the state government was directed toward fighting it. A sergeant instructor on National Guard duty attempted by 37-mm. gunfire to break the main oil pipe line that was feeding the blaze. Although he hit the pipe, it was too strong to be ruptured by the fire of this weapon. An officer on National Guard duty conceived the idea of blowing up the pipeline by bombs dropped from airplanes, thus diverting the oil from the fire. He telephoned the corps area air officer, who thought the scheme a good idea and agreed to have it done. About this time the corps area commander heard about it, sent for his chief of staff, told him that the idea was foolish and that he wanted to know who proposed it. The chief of staff called up the air officer and told him that the plan was ridiculous and would not work. "Who the hell says it's ridiculous?" questioned the air officer. "The corps area commander," replied the chief of staff. The air officer brought his fist down on the table with a bang and exclaimed: "It certainly is ridiculous, if he said so; and I am here to prove that he is right."

There are two personal matters that are of utmost importance to you as an adjutant general. You perhaps will be closer to your commander than is any other member of the staff family. Quite often the commander may ask your opinion of the ability of other officers. Your opinion should, and does, carry considerable weight with the commander. Therefore, petty personal differences must be put aside. Beware of gossip and avoid gossipers as you would a pestilence. The adjutant general who indulges in gossip, or even listens to it, is a menace to the harmony of a command. Inevitably such practices lead to discord and distrust. The adjutant general who permits gossip to color his reports to his commander or who gossips about his commander immediately impairs his value to that officer.

Relations with the Staff. Consider for a few moments your relations to the staff; or, as you are a staff officer, your relations within the staff. There is no place on a staff for an adjutant general who, by nature or habit, is temperamentally antagonistic toward those about him. Patience, patience, and

more patience is an absolutely essential qualification of any successful adjutant. Staff duties frequently overlap. Conflicts of interest arise which must be adjusted in the interest of the command as a whole. If the staff is to be an effective, helpful team, this calls for the exercise of tact, forbearance and unselfish effacement. When these conditions arise, no one is in better position to smooth the going than is the adjutant general of the command. Friendship and loyalty within the staff play an important part in teamwork and should be fostered by all members of the staff. Petty jealousies and inconsequential differences must be forgotten and shoved behind. Staff coordination is best effected by direct relations between officers of the different sections. In this way ideas are crystallized and plans adjusted in a minimum time before commencing the solution of a given problem or the drawing up of an order. This attitude gives free scope to the staff officer's initiative. To repeat, an adjutant general should know and study other members of the staff. He should assure himself that any question, any policy, any plan that is published to the command, has been properly coordinated among various staffs of higher and lower echelons.

You, as an adjutant general or an adjutant, should visit other adjutants, find out their difficulties and take action within the units of your command to eliminate these difficulties, or at least to minimize them. It may be that by these visits you can learn something from other adjutants, something about their methods of procedure, which will be of benefit to you in your own headquarters. It is always a good idea to get together with others and "fry the fat." In this way one can gather valuable ideas. This applies equally to all staff officers.

Relations with Commanders of Subordinate Units. Within a division, to take one example, the line of authority and responsibility passes directly from commander to the subordinate commander. Not only must you remember this and know that you are not in that line of authority or responsibility, but you must remember that subordinate commanders usually are senior in rank. All officers must be accorded that courtesy and consideration due rank and due one gentlemen from another, even though their ideas may be in conflict. It is a command principle that all orders and instructions from a higher unit to a subordinate unit are given to the commander thereof; and each individual is accustomed to look to his immediate superior for orders and instructions. An adjutant gen-

eral acting or speaking in the name of the commander, as he frequently does, must be sure that the commander has authorized such action. In those urgent circumstances where it may be necessary to act without specific authority of the commander, be sure that any directions you give in the name of the commander are the same that the commander would give if present and acquainted with the facts. In such a case, you must at the first opportunity advise the commander of the action you have taken. Nothing will bring about strained relations between the staff and subordinate commanders so quickly as staff usurpation of authority, or even suspicion of it. A cordial, helpful attitude among the staff should exist to cultivate this relationship. You should constantly bear in mind that no man, whatever his stock-in-trade, has so firm a grasp on his business as to warrant deafness to the opinions of others. Even after the commander's directives have been issued, if a frank, helpful relationship exists between the staff officer and subordinate commanders, many differences of execution can be ironed out and many misunderstandings avoided. You and other staff members must get along with subordinate commanders. When you visit subordinate commanders, you should report as follows to intervening commanders: first, on going, state the object of your visit; second, on returning, state what you have seen and what you intend to report, if anything. This method, while respecting the basic laws of courtesy, gives you an opportunity to adjust your personal observation to the viewpoints of the successive commanders. They will frequently give you information unknown or unavailable in the lower echelons.

Keep yourself interested always in all the elements of the command. If you fail to interest yourself in the needs of these about you, or if, with the mantle of the commander upon your shoulders, you play the role of critic only, you will be a depressing influence. You will become a handicap to your commander. In short, you will be a failure.

In conclusion, let us sum up:

A. Recognize no authority save that of the commander. His wishes and his interests must be paramount.

B. You will serve the commander best when you assist the troops most.

C. Jealously guard against any violation of the chain of command.

D. Know your commander; know the staff; know the subordinate commanders, their officers and their troops. Help them in any way you can, but studiously avoid meddling with responsibilities of subordinate commanders. Never assume the role of critic.

E. Lastly, maintain respect for the duties and responsibilities of others, respect the basic laws of courtesy, and realize that your mission is one of assistance to your commander and to his command.



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